

## Etymology of Some Common Names for New Zealand Freshwater Fishes<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Three vernacular names for New Zealand freshwater fishes have phonetic similarities that might suggest related etymologies: “kōkopu” (family Galaxiidae), “cockabully” (family Tripterygiidae), and “bully” (family Eleotriidae). That “kōkopu” has authentic roots in New Zealand Maori can be shown by its use in traditional Maori myth and legend, and also by the use of the same or similar words for fish elsewhere in Polynesia (e.g., “kōkopu” in the Cook Islands and “o’o’pu” in Hawai’i). The etymology of “cockabully” can be traced back through “cockabulla” to an origin in “kōkopu,” though the name “cockabully” is now applied to a group of fish that no evidence suggests were ever known to Maori as “kōkopu.” “Bully,” although appealing as a contraction of “cockabully,” and thus with origins in “kōkopu,” almost certainly had its origins in the English “bullhead,” even though the Maori “kōkopu” was probably sometimes used for fish now known as “bully.”

COMMON NAMES FOR species of animals and plants emerge in the languages of peoples who encounter and value them. These names often have origins in ancient times, and their meanings and etymologies sometimes are lost in antiquity. An example of one ancient common name, relevant to this discussion of the common names of some of New Zealand’s freshwater fishes, is “smelt,” which is applied to Northern Hemisphere fishes of the family Osmeridae. After European settlement, the name was used for New Zealand and Australian fishes of the family Retropinnidae that resemble (and happen to be quite closely related to) the Osmeridae (McDowall 1969, Begle 1991). Smelt apparently derives from the old Anglo-Saxon word “smeolt” meaning silvery (Regan 1911) and has nothing to do with the strong, cucumber odor of these fishes (McDowall 1990, McDowall et al. 1993). This same word seems to have found its way into a name for young salmon (Salmonidae) when they become uniformly silver and lose their “parr” marks (dark blotches or bands across the sides). At that stage they migrate to sea

and are known then as “smolts”; the process of color change is known as “smolting” (the Concise Oxford Dictionary does not admit this connection).

Maori, when they first arrived in New Zealand perhaps 1000–1200 yr ago (Simmons 1976, Salmond 1991), certainly brought an ancient linguistic history with them, but with no prior application to New Zealand animals and plants. A few species probably were the same as those known from their homelands in Polynesia and thus already “named.” Many acquired names transferred from similar species familiar to them, as apparently occurred with place names (O’Regan 1992). Otherwise, names had to be devised, being derived from their characteristics (shapes, colors, behaviors, etc.).

The process of naming was probably little different from that which occurred when Europeans arrived in New Zealand much later and gave English names to the same fauna and flora, so that New Zealand came to have “beech” and “pine” trees, “robins” and “tomtits” and so on, all perhaps resembling, but not necessarily closely related to, familiar species in Great Britain. The colonists were, of course, applying English names to species that already had long-used Maori names (“red pine” for “rimu,” and “blue duck” for

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“whio,” etc.). Some common names used by the British settlers were existing Maori names with English descriptors, such as “brown kiwi” or “North Island weka.”

These naming processes also apply to freshwater fishes. Maori had numerous names for many freshwater fish species (Buck 1926, Best 1929, Strickland 1990), but with the arrival of Europeans, English names were applied: “paraki” or “porohe” became known to Europeans as “smelt” [*Retropinna retropinna* (Richardson)], and “upokororo” as “grayling” (*Prototroctes oxyrhynchus* Günther). Eventually, fish names also became of mixed origins, as in “banded kōkopu” (*Galaxias fasciatus* Gray).

#### Some New Zealand Freshwater Fish Names

Common names now in popular use for New Zealand’s freshwater fishes are derived from both Maori and English (McDowall 1990, Strickland 1990), and the origins of some names, whether derived from Maori but looking like English names, or vice versa, are sometimes unclear.

The confusion and inconsistency that has attended the use of common names for New Zealand freshwater fishes is typified by three names: “kōkopu,” “cockabully,” and “bully”: (1) Some large freshwater fishes of the family Galaxiidae (including whitebait species) were known to some Maori as “kōpu,” or more often “kōkopu,” and this usage has been adapted and carried forward into common English usage for several similar and related fish probably all known to Maori as “kōkopu” (Strickland 1990, Williams 1990) (e.g., “giant kōkopu” [*Galaxias argenteus* (Gmelin)], “banded kōkopu” [*G. fasciatus*], and “shortjawed kōkopu” [*Galaxias postvectis* Clarke (McDowall 1990)]). There are other Maori names for these species in various locations and at various life stages (see Best 1929, Strickland 1990, Beattie 1994), but this is not a concern in this paper. (2) “Kōkopu” was also sometimes applied by Maori to other species, including fish now commonly known as “giant bully” [*Gobiomorphus gobioides* (Valenciennes, in Cuvier and Valenciennes)] and “common bully” (*G. cotidia-*

*mus* McDowall) (Buck 1926, Williams 1990, Beattie 1994). (3) In modern parlance, fishes of the genus *Gobiomorphus* (Eleotridae) in New Zealand are known as “bully,” as noted above (Stokell 1955, McDowall 1990). (4) Estuarine and marine fishes of the family Tripterygiidae (the “triplefins”) are widely and indiscriminately called “cockabully” (e.g., Graham 1956), though efforts are being made to replace this name with “triplefins” (Paulin and Roberts 1992).

#### Early Usage and Debate

The origins and etymologies of these various common names, and their relationships to each other (if any), are poorly documented. There are suggestions that some of them may have common roots, and that one or another has etymological precedence in either Maori or English.

Charles Heaphy (1842) referred to what was probably a “giant kōkopu” (*Galaxias argenteus* [McDowall 1980, 1990]) as “bull-trout,” whereas Meredith (1848) mentioned “bulla-bulla.” Is “bulla-bulla” a derivative of “bull-trout,” or is it a distorted version of the Maori “kōkopu”? The nineteenth-century West Coast surveyor and explorer Charles Douglas referred to what is now obviously a “giant kōkopu” as “cock-a-bulla,” but it is unclear whether he meant “kōkopu” or “cockabully,” if either. Or, given Douglas’s idiosyncratic spelling habits (McDowall 1980), it could have been both! However, when Francis Clarke (1899), another West Coast surveyor, referred to “cock-a-bullies,” he was certainly referring to *Gobiomorphus* rather than *Galaxias*, but, again, the etymology of his common name isn’t clear, though he clearly understood that Maori knew *Galaxias argenteus* as “kōkopu.” The relationships of these usages certainly highlight the difficulties in identifying linguistic sources of various names.

Amateur ichthyologist Gerald Stokell (1949) argued that “The name ‘bully’ is not an abbreviation of ‘cockabully’ but of ‘bull-head,’” bullhead referring to the European *Cottus gobio* Linnaeus (Cottidae [Maitland and Campbell 1992]). And he further as-

served that "Some forty years ago [the name bully] seemed sufficiently well established for its persistence to be assured, but at the present time it is being metamorphosed into "cockabully."

Stokell seems to have been implying a recent origin for "cockabully" and its derivation from "bully" or "bullhead." However, given the late nineteenth-century usages, noted above, by Douglas (McDowall 1980) and Clarke (1899), the validity of Stokell's argument is dubious. Stokell objected to the use of "cockabully" because "... no-one seems able to ascribe a meaning to it or indicate its derivation," but this seems an oversimplification, because some early European writers used "cock-a-bulla," "bulla-bulla," and even "bull-head" for what Maori called "kōkopu," and it seems that some Maori called "kōkopu" what Stokell claimed should be called "bully."

#### *Kōkopu an Authentic Maori Name*

That the name "kōkopu" is an authentic Maori name and has no derivations from English (such as being a Maori derivative of "cockabully") can be deduced from several sources. The word is used in Maori accounts of traditional history (Locke 1883, Best 1929), and lakes and waterways are known variously as Kaikōkopu and Waikōkopu, which seems to indicate a Maori interest in "kōkopu" in such places.

The name is used elsewhere in Polynesia, though not necessarily for similar or related fish species. The gobioid fish *Eleotris fusca* (Bloch & Schneider) is known as "kōkopu" in the Cook Islands (Jellyman 1991), whereas the similar and related *Awaous stamineus* (Edouyx & Souleyet) and other gobioids are called "o'opu" in Hawai'i (Titcomb 1972, Pukui et al. 1975, Kido et al. 1993); these fishes closely resemble New Zealand's *Gobiomorphus gobioides*, which was sometimes called "kōkopu" by Maori (Williams 1990, Beattie 1994). The Hawaiian "o'opu" seems equivalent to a softer, less guttural form of "kōkopu": the "k" in "kōkopu" has been replaced by a "glottal stop" (Pukui et al. 1975). Thus, "kōkopu," used for gobies in

Polynesia, probably came to New Zealand with Maori, was applied to very similar New Zealand eleotrids, but eventually came to be applied more consistently to galaxiids, which are very different from gobies/eleotrids.

A similar Polynesian etymological connection appears in "inanga," the northern New Zealand Maori name for the whitebait *Galaxias maculatus* (Jenyns); this is hardened to "inaka" by southern Maori (Ngai Tahu) of the South Island (Strickland 1990, Beattie 1994), but appears as the much softer "hinana" for small larval fishes that are caught running from the sea into rivers of Hawai'i, just like New Zealand's whitebait "inanga" (Titcomb 1972). Coincidentally, these Hawaiian fishes are also gobies, so again the name has shifted from that family in Polynesia to galaxiids in New Zealand. In Tahiti the spawn or small fry of fish are known as "inaa" (Jausen 1898, "frai de poisson").

#### *The Origins of "Cockabully" and "Bully"*

If it is accepted that "kōkopu" has strong authenticity in pre-European Polynesian Maori (and there seems no doubt about this), and given Douglas's early use of "cock-a-bulla" for one of the fish that some Maori called "kōkopu," a fairly strong case seems evident for "cockabully" being derived from the Maori "kōkopu." Thomson and Anderson (1921) certainly thought so, as did Acland (1951). Beattie (in a 1920 compilation published in 1994) quite explicitly connected "cockabully" to alternative Ngai Tahu names for "kōkopu": "kōkopara" and "kōkopura," which he thought sounded like "kokobala" and "kokobula"; Beattie concluded that "hence we get the familiar "Cockabully" known to all New Zealand boys." The Concise Oxford Dictionary lists "cockabully," attributes it to New Zealand, and indicates that it is derived from Maori. Phillipps (1951), whose use of common names for native fishes was highly erratic, argued that "cockabully" was "invented" by the Europeans in the early days and attributed the name to a merging of the English "bully" with the Maori "kōkopu." A simpler evolution of "kōkopu" or "kōkopara" variously through "bulla-bulla"

or "cock-a-bulla" to "cock-a-bully" and finally "cockabully" seems more parsimonious. All of this negates Stokell's (1955) assertion that "cockabully" has unknown derivation or meaning. However, it also indicates that current application of "cockabully" to species of Tripterygiidae has no historical precedent; I know of no reference to Tripterygiidae as "kōkopu." I can only assume that "cockabully" (derived from "kōkopu" [if my argument is correct]) that was used for both *Galaxias* and *Gobiomorphus* by early accounts (Buck 1926, Best 1929, Williams 1990) has "drifted" to Tripterygiidae. Perhaps this was partly through confusion or association with *Gobiomorphus* and the English name "bullhead," and perhaps partly through Stokell's attempts to restrict "bully" for use for *Gobiomorphus* and to avoid the use of "cockabully" for this genus. Probably, "cockabully" became a euphonious and appealing popular name, with lots of "character," to apply to any small, otherwise unknown fish. Its first explicit application to tripterygiids seems to have been by Thomson and Anderton (1921), in spite of their apparent belief that the name is derived from "kōkopu."

The origins of the name "bully" seem reasonably clear. Probably well before Douglas's "cock-a-bulla" (McDowall 1980) and Clarke's (1899) "cock-a-bully," Powell (1870) and Hutton (1872) applied "bullhead" to *Gobiomorphus gobioides* (a fish later called "giant bully" by Stokell [1955]), so that a fairly clear connection to the similar-looking English "bullhead" (*Cottus gobio* [Maitland and Campbell 1992]) can be made, as Stokell (1955) argued. Phillipps (1924, 1926, 1927, 1929) variously used "bulley," "bully," and "cockabully" for species of *Gobiomorphus*, but given his inconsistent usage, this is not a good basis for connecting "bully" and "cockabully." "Bully" thus seems to have come originally from "bullhead" and has no connections to the Maori "kōkopu" and its English derivative "cockabully," even though *Gobiomorphus gobioides* was occasionally called "kōkopu" by Maori and is now commonly called "giant bully" (Stokell 1955, McDowall 1990).

In conclusion, therefore, it appears that: (1) "kōkopu" is an authentic Polynesian and Maori name that was applied to quite diverse native fishes in New Zealand, as well as in other parts of Polynesia (in various forms), and has no derivations from English; (2) it is likely that "cockabully" is an English derivation of "kōkopu"; and (3) "bully," although superficially appealing as a contraction of "cockabully" (and thus derived from the Maori "kōkopu"), is more likely a contraction of the English "bullhead."

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